NEWSPAPER PROBLEM PAGES AND BRITISH SEXUAL CULTURE SINCE 1918

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This article offers an overview of the evolution of the problem page in British popular newspapers since 1918. It argues that newspaper problem columns and related features were regarded by many readers as an important source of advice and guidance on personal and sexual questions. It identifies three different phases in the development of the modern problem page. In the inter-war period, and into the 1940s, problem pages almost invariably provided staunch defences of conventional morality and portrayed sexuality as a dangerous instinct that needed to be restrained and managed. In the 1950s and 1960s, sexuality was increasingly depicted as positive and pleasurable force that needed to be expressed for personal and psychological well-being. Agony aunts became less concerned with defending the institution of marriage and started to offer some more challenging and opinionated material. Since the 1970s, in the context of a more sexualised and permissive culture, problem pages have developed a more hedonistic approach, and have been presented more overtly as entertainment.

KEYWORDS newspapers; problem pages; sexual culture; morality; advice; private life

Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of the popular newspapers that emerged in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was their preoccupation with the personal and the 'private'. If respectable Victorian morning newspapers were dominated by the activities of the public sphere—high politics, commerce and international diplomacy—the new publications aimed at the mass market, such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror*, sought to generate 'human interest' from the affairs of everyday life.[1] Features and guidance about domestic routines, food, health and social etiquette became a staple of the popular press: for Hugh Cudlipp, one of the most successful exponents of this new style of journalism, 'The relationship between reader and newspaper became more intimate' (Cudlipp 83–4).[2]

In many respects the epitome of this more intimate relationship was the problem column. Rather than commenting on public life, journalists adopted the role of confessor and counsellor to anguished individuals. In return for advice, readers confided some of their innermost secrets to the newspaper and allowed their experiences to be packaged as human interest stories. Such columns addressing correspondents' problems had a long history, of course, dating back to periodicals of the late seventeenth century; at the end of the nineteenth century they were updated for the modern era by a new generation of women's magazines.[3] When they took their place in popular newspapers after the First World War, however, they reached a wider readership and achieved a greater cultural prominence. The *Daily News* was one of the pioneers, running a short weekly feature in the early 1920s in which 'Helen Hope' answered questions about courtship and marriage. In the late 1920s the *Sunday Express* syndicated the column of

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the prolific American agony aunt 'Dorothy Dix' (the pen-name of Elizabeth Meriweather Gilmer) addressing 'Love and Home Problems'.[4] But it was in the mid-1930s that the problem column became a central part of modern popular journalism. 'Dorothy Dix' was given a significant platform in the reinvented *Daily Mirror* from December 1935, while Ann Temple's 'Human Case-Book' was promoted heavily by the *Daily Mail* from its launch in 1936.[5] Rivals soon followed suit with similar features of their own: 'everywhere problem columns appeared, disappeared, and reappeared', noted Temple.[6] Indeed, the period from the mid-1930s to the 1970s can be seen as the 'golden age' of the newspaper problem column, when agony aunts such as Dix, Temple, Marje Proops and Claire Rayner were among the most highly-paid and widely recognised journalists in Fleet Street, and significant amounts of money were invested by newspapers in responding to the hundreds of letters that poured in week by week. While problem columns have retained their place in most popular newspapers in recent decades, and they continue to advise thousands of readers a year, cost-cutting and changes in the media landscape have gradually served to lessen their cultural importance.

Problem pages have faced a long history of criticism for being trivial, prurient, amateurish and even dishonest: agony aunts have often been accused of inventing their letters for the titillation of readers (Kent ch. 1; Phillips 103). Until recently, moreover, they have received little sustained attention from academics: as a 'feminised' and 'non-political' form of popular culture, they have tended to be overlooked by historians, sociologists and media studies scholars (Morris 308), while surveys of women's magazines have often seen advice columns either as maintaining traditional gender stereotypes through a defence of conventional morality, or as offering unattainable solutions which fail to take account of the structural inequalities facing women (White; Winship 77–81). In recent years, however, a number of scholars have developed a fuller and more nuanced analysis of problem columns, demonstrating the ways in which they can provide an important forum for publicly debating and contesting contemporary mores.[7] As Moira Peelo and Keith Soothill have observed, problem columns act as 'social barometers indicating what is acceptable to say publicly about personal troubles' (Peelo and Soothill 10); they offer particularly rich evidence to historians exploring change over time. Despite these reassessments of the problem columns, plenty of research remains to be done, particularly on the newspaper (rather than magazine) version and the way it evolved over the twentieth century.[8] This article offers a preliminary survey, and makes two central arguments. First, it suggests that newspaper problem columns and related features were regarded by many readers as an important source of advice and guidance on personal and sexual questions at a time when there were relatively few accessible sources of information about such matters. The first part of the paper briefly reviews some of this evidence. Second, the article argues that these columns were not always as conservative as many have assumed. They sometimes provided a space in which independently-minded female journalists could challenge attitudes to gender and sexuality that prevailed elsewhere in the press; in the 1950s and 1960s, in particular, they served to encourage readers, and especially women, to reflect on their personal relationships and to be confident in claiming sexual pleasure. In so doing, these advice columns contributed to significant shifts in British sexual culture.

Trusted Advice?

When the *Daily Herald* journalist George West wrote in 1954 that he hoped that 'no one follows the advice' of press agony aunts and asserted that he knew 'no one who takes them seriously', he was merely repeating the conventional wisdom of the cultural elites (Patmore 86–7). Yet there is plenty of evidence from across the period that these columns were far more than casual entertainment for prurient readers, and that many people did indeed take them seriously. Before the 1960s, the majority of the population—especially women—had few reliable and easily accessible sources of information about sexuality, and whatever was published on the subject in popular newspapers or magazines, however euphemistic, tended to be carefully scrutinised. This public appetite for sexual knowledge was evident whenever there were prominent or explicit features about sex. When Marie Stopes wrote articles for newspapers and magazines after the First World War, for example, she was invariably deluged with letters pleading for more information (Davey; Hall Dear Dr Stopes, 14). Almost 30 years later, in 1950, a small newspaper piece mentioning the work of the Family Planning Association led to the association receiving over 5000 letters.[9] Even in the mid-1970s, when Claire Rayner discussed premature ejaculation in the *Sun*, she received 18,000 requests for her advice leaflet in ten days (Rayner 360–1). And it was not just when particularly sensitive subjects were raised that there were big post-bags, there was also a sizeable regular correspondence with the leading problem columnists. Precise evidence is scarce for earlier periods, but Ann Temple admitted that she was 'absolutely astounded' by the volume of post she received in response to her first column in 1936 (Temple 5). In the 1970s, Marje Proops at the *Daily Mirror* received around 40,000 letters a year, and Claire Rayner at the *Sun* seems to have received anywhere between 250 and 1500 letters a week; the *News of the World*'s John Hilton bureau—which addressed a broad range of consumer and citizenship issues as well as personal problems—received more than 100,000 a year.[10] In 2006, the *Sun*'s advice columnist Deirdre Sanders stated that she received between 100 and 300 letters a day (Phillips 103). There is, of course, the possibility that certain printed letters were invented or embellished, but this has been consistently denied by the journalists involved, and there was certainly more than enough genuine correspondence to fill daily columns many times over (Morris 309; Phillips 103). Such numbers suggest that a significant section of the readership viewed newspapers columnists as a trustworthy and convenient place to turn with their personal problems. Seemingly sympathetic figures with no direct power over readers' lives, these journalists offered many people an approachable alternative to frequently intimidating professional or local sources of advice.

Problem columns always had a dual purpose: as well as responding to specific individuals, they sought to inform and entertain a wider readership. They certainly seem to have succeeded in this latter role. Problem columns usually obtained high interest ratings in readership surveys. In its investigation of the national press in 1948, for example, Mass-Observation found that the *Daily Mail*'s Ann Temple received 'warmer tributes than perhaps any other feature writer encountered in this analysis'.[11] In 1990, research carried out for the *Mirror* found that Marje Proops was well ahead of the paper's other columnists in terms of reader interest (cf. Kent 28; Patmore 314). It is for this reason that newspapers invested considerable resources in answering letters to problem pages. Most of the columnists, after all, required a team of assistants to manage their substantial

correspondence. Marje Proops had a team of 'eight dedicated girls' helping her, while the *News of the World*'s John Hilton bureau had at one stage a team of 100 experts that it could call upon, and by 1974 it was costing £100,000 a year to run (Bainbridge and Stockdill 133; Proops 18; Somerfield 106).

There are very few studies exploring the ways in which problem pages and related features shaped the ideas of readers, but a couple of surveys from the 1940s do suggest that there was potential for them to have an effect in improving public understanding of sexual issues. In 1942 the *Daily Mirror* ran an unprecedentedly explicit series on the dangers of venereal diseases, written by a specialist, and including answers to correspondents (Bingham Venereal Disease). Mass-Observation conducted a study of public attitudes to venereal disease, and not only found high approval rates for the *Mirror* series but also suggested that the paper was helping to remedy significant gaps in knowledge; some female respondents admitted they had never heard of the diseases until they read about them in the press.[12] Another survey a year later, after a further series of VD information notices in the press organised by the Ministry of Health, found that those who were exposed to the material 'consistently showed more knowledge of the subject than those who had not'.[13] The popular press, it seemed, could successfully act as a social educator on sexual questions.

All of this evidence is fragmentary, and it would be wrong to suggest that problem pages appealed to all readers, that they were viewed uncritically, or that they were invariably reliable sources of advice and expertise. Nevertheless, there is enough here to encourage us not to treat the problem page as trivial and inconsequential, but rather as a channel through which contemporary sexual culture was both reflected and shaped.

Changing Styles and Functions

In a short survey it is possible only to offer some rather general and tentative conclusions about the changing nature of the problem page: a considerable amount of further research needs to be done before we can develop a detailed and nuanced analysis. This article, nevertheless, will argue that we can plausibly identify three different phases in the development of the modern problem page. In the inter-war period, and into the 1940s, problem pages almost invariably provided the staunch defence of conventional morality that they are usually known for. There was little interest in broaching controversial issues, and sexuality was portrayed as a dangerous instinct that needed to be restrained and managed. In the 1950s and 1960s, we can recognise a different phase in which greater emphasis was placed on the importance of sexual expression, with women in particular being encouraged to claim sexual pleasure. Agony aunts became less concerned with defending the institution of marriage and gave a higher priority to the feelings of the individual; they also started to offer some more challenging and opinionated material. By the 1970s, however, in the context of a more sexualised and permissive culture, the educationalist rhetoric of the traditional problem pages came to seem rather dated. Led by the *Sun*, the problem pages developed a more hedonistic approach, and they were presented more overtly as entertainment. Cost-cutting also restricted the scale of the services offered, and led to pressures for problem pages to

create alternative revenue streams. The following sections will briefly consider each of these periods in turn.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, advice columns did little to challenge a sexual culture that emphasised privacy, respectability and female innocence (Szreter and Fisher). They consistently celebrated the virtues of sexual restraint outside marriage and defended the expectation that women (if not men) should be virgins when they wed. In the *Mirror*, Dorothy Dix, as Hugh Cudlipp noted, 'positively stood for law and order' (Cudlipp 85) and she repeatedly advised young women against any forms of physical intimacy with men that might put them in a compromising position. She declared bluntly in 1938, for example, that 'I don't believe in petting among boys and girls' ('He Thinks He Deserves A Kiss'). Ann Temple likewise espoused high moral standards based clearly on the Christian tradition, in which the individual should strive 'to keep the body in subjection to the mind' (Temple 99). Women, she believed, could not afford to regard sex with the same equanimity as men. 'Sex being more fettering to women than to a man', she argued, 'its fundamental protections must be in her hands' (Temple 83). Problem columnists warned women about the potential consequences of pre-marital sex by describing in unsparing detail the miseries of unwanted pregnancy and abandonment. In 1948, David Mace, the Secretary of the Marriage Guidance Council and regular advice columnist for *The Star*, displayed little sympathy for a Miss M, whose fiancé left her after she became pregnant: 'Miss M did something which involved the possibility of a new human life beginning its progress . . . Knowing this, she deliberately gambled . . . for a stake which was no higher than the pursuit of a personal pleasure'. The absent father was denounced as a 'coward and a cad', but the bulk of the column focused on Miss M, because Mace wanted 'her to realise that the final responsibility for her plight rests solidly on her own shoulders' ('Men Who Abandon Girls'). The ideas underpinning the deeply-entrenched sexual 'double standard' continued to shape the advice in these columns, and women were forced to accept the role of being the ultimate guardians of sexual morality.

Married readers, meanwhile, were warned about the disastrous repercussions of extra-marital affairs. Appeals to the romantic ideal could not be allowed to challenge the sacred bond of marriage. Once betrothed, the duty of maintaining the relationship was deemed to outweigh the temptations of love with another person. A couple who had found love and happiness in each other's arms, despite both being married to other partners, were told by Dorothy Dix in 1938 to stop their affair immediately: 'you have no right to sacrifice your innocent families to your passion . . . There is something more worthwhile having in life than love, and that is the integrity of your own soul, and the knowledge that you had the strength to do your duty' (''We're Married''). Dix advised wronged wives to 'make the best of a very bad job' and try to save their marriages ('He Thinks He Deserves A Kiss'). Ann Temple was similarly determined to protect the institution of marriage and expressed her concern that, due to the influence of Freudian psychology in the 1930s, 'the wholesome, imperative qualities of self-control, restraint and self-discipline were being interpreted as repressions'. She tried to make a stand against this creed of 'self-first' and the associated change 'from respect for marriage into the belief that love matters more than marriage' (Temple 83). During the Second World War newspapers believed that it was vital for popular morale that they defend relationships put under strain by military service and extended absences from home. Internal

correspondence makes clear that 'breaking and broken marriages' was the 'main theme' of the thousand or so letters that poured into the *Mirror*'s office every week in the early 1940s.[14] Accordingly, adulterers were given even shorter shrift than usual, and columnists across Fleet Street warned women against consorting with American GIs.[15] Temple herself led a campaign to ensure that military allowances given to 'unmarried dependants living as a wife' did not exceed—as they sometimes had—those paid to legal wives (Temple 85–88). Columnists in this period, then, accepted a public morality that prioritised the stability of marriage—deemed to be necessary for the stability of society as a whole—over individual happiness and fulfilment.[16]

By the 1950s, however, columnists gradually began to portray sexuality—at least within marriage—less as a dangerous instinct that needed to be restrained, and more as a positive and pleasurable force that needed to be expressed for personal well-being. This shift owed much to the growing influence of sexology and psychoanalysis in the post-war welfare state (Lewis; Waters); a new generation of agony aunts, led by Marje Proops, started to embrace the ideas of Stopes, Freud and Kinsey, and played an important role in disseminating them to a broader audience. Personal issues were, moreover, achieving a greater prominence in popular papers conscious of the need to adapt their content in response both to the social changes brought by increasing affluence and to the media competition posed by the rise of television: alongside the problem column responding to specific questions, more space was now given to broader advice features about sex, marriage and relationships.[17] So while columnists still warned against pre-marital and extra-marital affairs, they also became much more likely to encourage married readers, and women in particular, to lose their inhibitions and explore the possibilities of sexual pleasure. In 1951, for example, the *Mirror*'s Mary Brown invited husbands to 'air their grievances' about their wives and found that 'overwhelmingly' the most common complaint related to disappointing sex lives. Brown was sympathetic and dismissed the 'virtuous matrons muttering "Men – That's all they think about!"' Although Brown's traditionalism was evident in her assumption that men 'had stronger sexual urges than women', she insisted that sex had to take a 'happy and proportionate place in marriage' and called on women to be 'free and generous'; only when sex became a battlefield was it 'unpleasant and shameful' ('Husbands v. Icebergs').

The following year Ann Douglas of the *Sunday Pictorial* analysed the letters sent to her and identified 'Ignorance of Sex' as the second most significant cause of 'marriage wrecks'. Noting that 'men are just as ignorant as are women', due to their tendency to 'confuse sex experience with knowledge', she lamented that 'about six women out of ten still feel guilty about sex, regarding it as something shameful but necessary'. She made it clear that by communication and a willingness to learn—including seeking 'sex advice from a doctor' if necessary—such marital misery could be avoided ('The Two Great Enemies'). In 1955, a contributor to the *News of the World* similarly emphasised the need for more 'generosity and joy' in the treatment of sex: 'Too many married people, especially women, think their duty is done if they refrain from casting their eyes beyond their marriage partner; or if they concede marital rights with patience' ('Design For Happy Marriage!'). Some of this material showed little understanding of the genuine reasons for women's anxieties about sex—fear of pregnancy, the thoughtlessness of their partners, an upbringing in social environments hostile to sexual expression—but space was also given

to more sympathetic perspectives. Professor Kinsey's 1953 report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, was significant in propelling these perspectives into the public domain: 'Women, contrary to popular belief, are physically capable of responding sexually as quickly as men', noted the *Mirror* on the day of report's publication in August 1953: 'Female ''frigidity'' is a man-made situation . . . They [men] go far too quickly and offer a variety of love-making that may mean little to a woman' ('Men Don't Know Women').

By the 1960s columnists increasingly acknowledged the sexual agency of women and they supported their efforts to be self-reflective about sexual pleasure. Writing in 1963 Marje Proops accepted that 'most girls have had some kind of sexual experience before marriage', but she told the 'recent bride' that after the wedding sex was more satisfying because the 'fear of pregnancy, guilt, [and] terror of being found out' disappeared. She encouraged newly-wed women to take the initiative in communicating their sexual desires. 'Tell him what you need and ask him about his needs'. Sex was a skill to be mastered gradually, with the appropriate assistance if necessary: 'You'll discover the art of sex by experiment, learning as you go. And if you find you are a bit slow on the uptake – or he is – buy a book' ('Oh Marje'). Two months later, she wrote another column eulogising the power of sex to enrich lives: 'Without it (or without the best of it) life is arid, boring, wearying, unenticing, uneventful, uninspiring. With it (or the best of it) life is rewarding, exciting, moving, amusing, exhilarating and splendid. Those who maintain the myth that sex isn't everything have my profound pity' ('Marjorie Proops'). As Proops's comments indicated, many journalists by the 1960s enthusiastically accepted the Freudian view that sex was central to individual identity and fulfilment.

The recognition of the strength of women's desires also led to columnists offering greater sympathy to those who cited the lack of a satisfying sex life to justify adultery. In 1966 Sara Robson in the *Daily Mirror* was far more compassionate than Dorothy Dix would have been to a woman who had engaged in a brief one night affair after being frustrated by the sexual coldness of her husband: 'A normally passionate woman living with a husband she loves, but seldom makes love with, is dreadfully vulnerable to the temptation you fell for. The perfectly natural and proper sexual side of her nature can only be held down at great cost'. Robson warned that if the lack of sex was not addressed with expert help, 'similar incidents will happen again' ('A Secret'). Such advice was typical of a broader shift among counsellors and psychologists in this period towards prioritising personal relationships over the stability of marriage (Lewis). More broadly, some columnists sought to understand, rather than condemn, the mores of the young in an apparently more 'permissive' society. Marje Proops, in particular, caused controversy in the late 1960s when she advised boys to take their own contraceptives to parties, while in 1976 she accepted, with some reservations, that group sex was not inevitably harmful and could be pleasurable to some (Patmore 180, 252). Freed from the need to defend marriage as an institution, columnists took pragmatic decisions about 'alternative' sexual practices based on the available evidence.

At the same time, problem columnists also increasingly used their positions to highlight controversial issues that they believed affected the lives of their largely female readership. In 1957, for example, Proops publicised a letter from a 27-year-old working-class mother of two saying that she was 'self-conscious and unhappy' because she was 'only 33 inches round the bust' and that she was considering spending £100 on a breast

enlargement operation ('What's Wrong With This Figure?') Proops used the opportunity to launch a major attack on the contemporary 'Cult of the Big Bosom' which left many women with insecurities about their body-image; this attack attracted a huge response from readers and resulted in a front-page article on the subject.[18] Angela Phillips has argued that problem pages can create spaces which provide an 'internal challenge' to the 'masculine discourses' prevailing elsewhere in the popular press: Proops's attack on the pin-up culture beginning to prevail in newspapers in the 1950s is an excellent example of this (Bingham Family Newspapers ch. 6; Phillips). Campaigners also viewed problem pages as vehicles through which to influence public debate. Reform organisations such as the Family Planning Association, the Abortion Law Reform Association and the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Child (later One Parent Family) maintained contacts with problem columnists and found that being mentioned in their columns was one of the most effective ways of gaining national publicity.[19] Such mentions became increasingly prominent in the 1960s as Proops, Anne Allen and a number of other female journalists produced significant articles on issues such as abortion, divorce and homosexuality, and lent support to the campaigns for legal reform (Bingham Family Newspapers 82–8). Such features fostered debate about the way the state regulated sexuality, and helped to turn 'personal troubles' into 'public issues' (Peelo and Soothill). By encouraging a more open, reflective and critical discussion of sex, problem pages can be said to have made a significant contribution to the climate of reform in the 1950s and 1960s.

In many respects, though, the relaunch of the *Sun* under Rupert Murdoch in November 1969 marked the end of this era. In an increasingly sexualised society, the information and advice offered by problem columnists were usually available elsewhere, and the educationalist rhetoric they used came to seem old-fashioned. A more hedonistic and consumerist language of sexual pleasure emerged, and problem columns were more and more seen as a form of entertainment. Symbolic of this new approach was the *Sun*'s serialisation in October 1970 of *The Sensuous Woman*, a sex manual written by the American author Joan Garrity.[20] Garrity claimed to be able to show all women how to 'attract a man worth your attention, drive him wild with pleasure, and keep him coming back for more' by improving self-awareness and honing sensuality through a series of 'sexercises' ('Let Me Help You'). Hers was a post-Christian view of sex in which the key requirements were physical preparation and proper technique: women should 'train like an athlete for the act of love' and be able to move their 'pelvis and bottom as if they were loaded with ball-bearings' ('Now It's Sexercise Time'; 'Let Me Help You'). The underlying implication was that women who failed to master these techniques could not complain if unsatisfied partners sought a better experience elsewhere. Inadequacy could not be tolerated in the sexually demanding 1970s: 'If you are going to stop him from straying, you must give him the variety and adventure of love at home that he might find, and easily, elsewhere . . . Married or not, loving you as he does, he will not stop looking and maybe sampling another woman' ('How to Stop Your Man from Straying'). Women were told to be equally demanding: even if a partner was 'ideal' in every way except that 'he doesn't turn you on as a lover', he should be ditched ('Make Sure Your Man's In Tune'). Great sex, it seemed, was now a required part of the modern lifestyle.

The serialisation of the *Sensuous Woman* was deemed a huge success—indeed, for the *Sun*'s editorial staff it was 'the ''definitive corker'', the standard against which all other

serialisations were measured' (Chippindale and Horrie 33). With its emphasis on pleasure, physical technique, and the realisation of fantasy, the feature was an accurate guide to the way in which the press coverage of sex was moving, and the *Sun* produced a number of similar features in subsequent years.[21] Such material was pitched at what had undoubtedly become a more sexually aware and insistent female readership. Marje Proops noted in 1976 that 'Twenty years ago, women wrote about their sexually demanding men. Now, many men write about sexually demanding women. Aggrieved women ask why they don't get an adequate number of orgasms' (Proops 24–25). In this climate, though, problem columnists were increasingly placed under pressure to provide titillating copy. Kelvin MacKenzie, editor of the *Sun* between 1981 and 1994, reportedly used to become frustrated when the paper's 'Dear Deirdre' column tried to be serious, instructing staff to 'Tell her to put a dirty letter in here'(Chippindale and Horrie 109). In the late 1980s, Claire Rayner felt obliged to resign from the *Sunday Mirror* after editorial demands for 'sexier letters' (Rayner 397). Despite the resistance of agony aunts, in recent years the scenarios discussed in problem pages have become ever more reminiscent of soft pornography: 'She's Gone Sex Crazy—Wife Wants Open Marriage', and 'I'm Gay but Slept with Two Women at Swingers' Party' are typical headlines.[22] The emphasis on titillation has become even clearer with the introduction of regular photo strips featuring scantily clad models; websites offer lurid video equivalents. Problem columns now have a similar appearance to the masculine entertainment of 'page 3', and the opportunities for them to provide spaces critical of broader tabloid culture have significantly receded.[23]

Since the 1970s, moreover, the resources devoted to reader advice services have been substantially reduced. Soon after taking over the *News of the World*, Rupert Murdoch closed the John Hilton bureau to cut costs (Bainbridge and Stockdill 234), and even if readers are still promised 'a personal reply free of charge' they are also repeatedly encouraged to consult expensive pay phone lines ('Dear Deirdre'). Pushed further back in larger papers, problem pages no longer have the prominence they had in the mid-twentieth century; some editors have resorted to the use of celebrity columnists to maintain reader interest.[24] Although the advice they offer may be well-meaning, and may indeed still help confused readers, it is clear that the content of these columns has been subordinated to a wider agenda of sexualised entertainment.

Conclusion

It is important not to exaggerate the contribution of advice columns to the education of the public. The responses to problems were necessarily brief and frequently banal. Despite their claims to frankness, columnists in newspapers could not be as specific and detailed as doctors and counsellors, and they always had one eye on entertaining the wider readership. Letters about minority or 'unorthodox' sexual practices, in particular, could receive rather dismissive responses, and, certainly before the 1970s, gay men and women were not always treated sensitively. One reader, born in 1948, recalled her disappointment when as a teenager she had written to Marje Proops about her belief that she was a lesbian, and eventually received the reply 'Don't worry, dear, you'll grow out of it' (Oram and Turnbull 265). On the other hand, many correspondents testified to the value of the advice they were given. For one correspondent who suffered sexual abuse at home,

Claire Rayner was a 'lifeline' and a 'guiding light'; seeing her letter published in the *Mirror*, and receiving a personal reply from Rayner herself, prompted this reader to seek advice from a teacher and starting dealing with the issue ('A Reader Writes'). The columns provided a popular, accessible and often thought-provoking forum for the discussion of personal and sexual issues; their significance is to be found not so much in the specific advice they offered as in the general encouragement they gave readers, and especially women, to reflect on their lives, to claim sexual pleasure, and to reject unhappy relationships. They suggested that readers talk about their problems with their partners and provided them with some of the vocabulary to do so; they also advised them to seek help from doctors, counsellors or relevant support organisations where necessary. Far from being trivial, advice columns contributed to the process by which the British public became more self-reflexive about sex.

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Notes

1. On this process, see LeMahieu ch. 1, Conboy ch. 5–6, Bingham Gender ch. 1.
2. Hugh Cudlipp (1913)–1998) joined the *Daily Mirror* as features editor in 1935, moving on to edit the *Sunday Pictorial* from 1937 to 1940 and (after war service) 1946 to 1949. Following a brief spell at the *Sunday Express*, he served as editorial director for both the *Mirror* and *Pictorial* from 1953 to 1968, and was chairman of parent company IPC until his retirement in 1973.
3. For early agony aunts see Kent ch. 1 and Berry ch. 8; Beetham argues that the first modern magazine 'agony aunt' was Annie Swan in *Women at Home* (1892–1920).
4. For example, *Daily News*, 4 Nov. 1922: 6; 2 May 1925: 4; *Sunday Express*, 26 Aug. 1928: 13. For Dorothy Dix, see Chiasson 143.
5. For the introduction of the 'Dorothy Dix' column, see *Daily Mirror*, 3 Dec. 1935: 7, and Cudlipp 84–5; for the introduction of Anne Temple's 'Human Case-Book' see Temple, ch. 1.
6. On the emergence of rivals see Temple ch. 1; quotation p. 7. In the late 1930s, for example, the *Star* introduced 'The Voice of Experience' column, the *Daily Sketch* ran the 'D'Alroy Friendship Page', and the *Sunday Pictorial* offered Jean Fairfax's 'Love Bureau'.
7. See, for example, Peelo and Soothill; Berry; Morris; Phillips; Kent also offers a thoughtful popular history.
8. It would also be useful to compare the evolution of the problem page in women's magazines and newspapers. Cynthia White and Lesley Hall have both noted that women's magazines in the 1930s conveyed positive messages about sex in marriage; but there is also evidence that conservative morality remained strong at least until the Second World War (Hall Eyes tightly shut; Kent; White). Further research is clearly needed.
9. Wellcome Library, London, Family Planning Association Papers, A17, BBC Woman's Hour transcript, 1 Dec. 1955.

10. For Proops, see Press Council 100. For Rayner, different figures have been quoted: she wrote that her 'weekly mailbag in those first months [in 1974] hovered between seven hundred and fifteen hundred a week' (Rayner 359), but Bromley notes that a lower figure of 250 letters a week was given to the Royal Commission on the Press, rising to 1100 a week by the late 1980s (Bromley 151); for the John Hilton Bureau, see Lamb 183.
11. Mass-Observation File Report, 2557, 'Attitudes to Daily Newspapers', Jan. 1948 (repr. Brighton: Harvester Press Microform Publications, 1983): 27.
12. Mass-Observation File Report 1573, 'Public Attitudes to VD', Jan. 1943: 1–2, further notes, 3; M-O File Report 1599, 'The Public and VD', Feb. 1943: 2–3.
13. The National Archives, Kew, RG/23/38, Wartime Social Survey Inquiry 18 Mar. to 17 Apr. 1943.
14. Bute Library, University of Cardiff, Cudlipp Papers, Cecil King to Hugh Cudlipp, 12 Jan. 1943.
15. When a married man declared himself in 'very much in love' with a 'single girl', the reply to his request for guidance was unequivocal: 'Forget each other, quickly': *Daily Mirror*, 10 Aug. 1943: 3.
16. On changing ideas about the relationship between marital stability and individual happiness, see Lewis.
17. On these broader shifts, see Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*
18. See *Daily Mirror*, 26 Sept. 1957: 1, 8–9; 28 Sept. 1957: 7; 1 Oct. 1957: 11.
19. There is plenty of evidence for these connections in the papers of the various associations: see, for example, FPA Papers, Wellcome Library, London, A17/5 Patricia Cripps, Report on Conversation with Mrs Ruth Smith, 12 Dec. 1956; A17/7 Mrs J Clifford Smith to Miss Anne Allen, 21 Sept. 1965; ALRA Papers, Wellcome Library, London, A11/1, Marjorie Proops to Dr D L Simms, 28 Sept. 1966. On the NCUMC, see Evans 151. See also Proops 18–19.
20. *The Sun* 7–14 Oct. 1970.
21. For example, *The Sun*, 15 Jan. 1973: 14–15; *The Sun*, 23 Jan. 1973: 16–17. For more on the press and sexual pleasure, see Holland.
22. *Daily Star*, 20 Mar. 2003: 30; *The Sun* 8 July 2010: 44.
23. For the *Sun*'s website, see www.sun.co.uk
24. At the time of writing (April 2011), the *Daily Mirror* employs Coleen Nolan, the singer and television presenter, as its problem columnist.

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